HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF TASAWWUF IN WEST AFRICA WITH PARTICULAR REFERENCE TO NORTHERN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

The central focus of this thesis is an attempt to provide a synopsis on the historical development of Tasawwuf. In so doing it remains pertinent to define Tasawwuf as a concept and trace how it originated and gained currency among the Muslims, taking into cognizance the genesis and historical dimensions it went through from the early period of Islam. It also delves on the historical development of Tasawwuf in the West African sub-region and Hausaland in Northern Nigeria, particularly the Qadiriyyah and the Tijaniyyah Sufi orders. It also discusses the role played by Tasawwuf as a catalyst of Islamic proselytization process especially in West Africa and Northern Nigeria. Contributions of some prominent Muslim Sufi scholars like Shaykh Abdullahi bin Fodio towards the development of Tasawwuf in the region will also be appreciated.

1. Introduction

It is indeed a fact that in the early days of Islam the Muslims generally had a very high moral standing. With the passage of time the moral tone among the Muslims continued to dwindle which resulted in having adverse effects on their attitudes and values. Consequently the Muslim society changed drastically, giving rise to a deep spiritual and moral perplexity and spiritual decay. This glaring spiritual and moral degeneration certainly requires corrective remedial measures, which Tasawwuf seeks to offer through spiritual discipline and rigorous moral and ethical training.
2. The Concept of Tasawwuf

Tasawwuf is an Arabic word that has been anglicized as “Sufism” even though Sufism is not originally an English word. Sufism is a noun, its adjective is Sufi which signifies a Muslim mystic according to Encarta English dictionary.

Al-Dhahabi feels that Tasawwuf as a concept is derived from the Arabic word ‘Suf’ which literally means wool. The early Muslim sufis used woolen clothes as their common dress. Another view has it that the term derived its origin from the Arabic word “al-safa’” which signifies purity. According to another contention the concept derived its origin from Greek word Sophia which means wisdom. Sayyid Hussein Nasr defines Tasawwuf as consciousness of Allah. In his Diya’ al-Siyasat Shaykh Abdullah bin Fodio also defines the concept as God-consciousness (al-Ihsan) which necessitates a Muslim servant to worship Allah as if He is seeing Him.

3. Bases of Tasawwuf in the Qur’an and Sunnah

There are numerous verses in the Qur’an and also prophetic Tradition that serve as bases for Tasawwuf. Some of the features of Tasawwuf such as piety, sincerity, devotion to worship, avoidance of sins and other moral qualities are stressed in both the Qur’an and Hadith.

For instance on piety Allah (SWT) says:

O you who believe fear Allah as He should be feared and die not except in a state of Islam. (Qur’an 3:102)

In another ayah, Allah (SWT) says:

So fear Allah as much as you can, listen and obey... (Qur’an 64:16)

Concerning Taqwa (piety) the prophet (SAW) was reported to have said:

Fear Allah where so ever you may be, follow up an evil deed by a good one which will wipe out (the former) and treat people with good conduct.

Concerning zuhd (asceticism), Allah (SWT) says:

Wealth and sons are allurements of the life of this world, but the things that endure good deeds are best in the sight of your Lord as rewards, and best as (the foundation for) hopes. (Qur’an: 18:46)

1 Ndagi, M.U (1999) understanding Tariqatu Tijaniyyah, Integrated work systems, Abuja, P.1
4 Ibid

Again Allah (SWT) states:

O men certainly the promise of Allah is true, let not then this present life deceive you, nor let the chief deceiver (Satan) deceive you about Allah. (Qur’an 35:5)

The prophet (SAW) has said concerning zuhd:

Be in this world as though you were a stranger or traveler. When evening comes to you, do not expect morning, and when morning comes to you do not expect evening. Take your health (a precaution) for your sickness and from your life for your death.⁸

On the need for remaining always conscious of Allah (SWT), the Qur’an states:

... and He is with you where so ever you may be, and Allah sees well all that you do. (Qur’an 57:4)

In a Hadith narrated by Umar bin al-khattab (R.A) the prophet (SAW) Said:

Worship Allah as though you are seeing Him, even though you do not see Him, yet He sees you.⁹

4. Origin and Early Development of Tasawwuf

Tasawwuf as a discipline came about as a rectitude of beliefs, embellishment or beautification of acts of devotion to Allah (SWT), taking the exemplary life of the prophet(s) as a model in all ramifications. Tasawwuf as a way of life started during the time of the prophet (SAW) and that of his companions even though it was not recognized with such a nomenclature. It is undeniable fact that both the prophet (SAW) and his companions had adopted ascetic (zuhd) life style as a matter of expedient preference. It is this zuhd which forms the fundamental premissoral axis upon which the whole idea of Tasawwuf is based. The attitude of shunning the temptations of the material world and commitment in striving for success in the Hereafter is essentially the concern of Tasawwuf.¹⁰

It is on record that both the prophet (SAW) and his companions have demonstrated this ascetic (zuhd) commitment through their dispositions of a very high moral and spiritual discipline. They chose to adopt an austere simple life and also remained very strict and dutiful in their observance of worship to Almighty Allah. They turned away from the glitters of this world in preference to a better life Hereafter.

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¹⁰ As a matter of fact both the Qur’an and the prophetic Sunnah clearly advocates that the Muslims should adopt such a life style in order to achieve spiritual success.
Hamidullah posits:

*Tasawwuf* as a way of life originates from the devotional practices of the people of *suffah* (*Ahl al-suffah*) who lived permanently in the prophet’s (SAW) mosque at Madinah. They lived an ascetic life devoting most of their time in the worship of Allah (SWT) under the guidance of the prophet (SAW). During the night, they passed their time like the best mystics in the observance of supererogatory prayers and meditation on Allah. Call this institute a covenant, or by any other name, there is no doubt that the inmates of the *suffah* were more attached to spiritual practices than to material avocation.\(^{11}\)

Inspite of their total engagement in a kind of ascetic life, nonetheless the *Ahl al-suffah* were not at all curtailed by this from having social interactions with the society. They engaged in one kind of work or the other in order to earn a living, so that they do not become pampers who constitute a liability and un-necessary burden on the society. Apart from this, the *Ahl al-suffah* also participated actively in all jihad encounters.\(^{12}\)

A cursory historical glance at the kind of ascetic life lived by the prophet (SAW) and his companions (R.A) particularly the four Rightly guided caliphs leaves no one in doubt that they lived a true life of *Tasawwuf*. They lived a simple life, ate simple food, wore simple dresses, and had simple houses\(^{13}\). They avoided competition in accumulation of wealth and for this reason most of them never left behind huge wealth and vast estates after their death. This implies that they will face less problems on the Day of final Reckoning in the Hereafter.

During the time of Caliph Uthman bin Affan (R.A) a new dimension of *Tasawwuf or zuhd* emerged. It was championed by Abu Dharr al-Ghifari (R.A) who felt dissatisfied with the manner some of the leaders were amassing and hoarding wealth. In fact there were other prophet’s companions who had similar resentment and personal dissatisfaction over what was happening. This prompted Abu Dharr and other companions having same feelings to voluntarily withdraw from public engagements, perhaps as a silent sign of prophet.\(^{14}\)

This tendency of isolation (*uzlah*) and engagement in devotional worship gained currency among some of the companions of the prophet (SAW) and even their followers (*Tabi’in*). The trend of seclusion for observance of worship (*Ibadah*) later transformed into an organized set of practices which came to be known as *Tasawwuf*.\(^{15}\) This idea of *Tasawwuf* developed and became more popular in the second century After Hijrah during the Umayyad rule.


\(^{12}\) Ibid

\(^{13}\) See more details in Majid Ali Khan, The pious caliphs, Diwan Press London.

\(^{14}\) Kaura, op.cit, P.63

\(^{15}\) Ahmad, M. (2006) The contributions of Shaykh Abdullah bin Fodio to sufism, un-published Ph.D Thesis submitted to the Department of Islamic studies Bayero University Kano, P.54
Al-Dhahabi opined that the first person to be addressed as *sufi* was Abu Hashim al-sufi (d.150 A.H)\(^\text{16}\). In the second century of Hijrah writings on *Tasawwuf* gained popularity. It was believed that some of the Sufi writers might have been conversant with the ideas of Greek philosophy, Christianity and Buddhism which perhaps influenced their thinking. For this reason some of them came up with some speculative and philosophical ideas in *Tasawwuf* which are antithetical to the basic teachings of the Qur’an and prophetic Sunnah.

In fact it could be posited that in the early period of its existence *Tasawwuf* flourished almost entirely on individual basis. However in the 6th – 7th century After Hijrah its proponents began to organize themselves into fraternities or Sufi orders better known as *Turuq* (single *Tariqah*). Subsequently the *Turuq* came up with rules of initiation and organized practices under the leadership of Shaykh who were regarded as spiritual masters.\(^\text{17}\) As time went by many *Sufi* orders emerged and spread in different parts of the Muslim world.

5. **Introduction of *Tasawwuf* in West Africa and Northern Nigeria**

Sufi ideas were generally circulated in the nooks and crannies of the Muslim world. The annual Hajj event served as a factor that facilitated its spread through personal contact with free flow and exchange of knowledge and ideas. In the 12th century C.E, Abu Madyan Shu’aib bin Hussain (d.1198 C.E) went on Hajj, according to Trimingham, after which he proceeded to Baghdad. He met Shaykh Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani (d.1166 C.E) the founder of the *Qadiriyyah Sufi* order who initiated him into the Qadiriyyah order. When he returned to his home town Fez, he introduced the *Qadiriyyah Sufi* order in North Africa\(^\text{18}\). This order spread rapidly in most parts of North Africa like a wild fire. It quickly penetrated to West Africa through the efforts of Berber and Arab traders and Muslim missionaries.

In fact the introduction of Islam and *Tasawwuf* in the West African region was a spontaneous and simultaneous exercise. The Muslim scholars who brought Islam to West Africa were mainly *sufis*. Hence it could be concluded that *Tasawwuf* is as old as Islam in West Africa. Notable among such *sufi* scholars include Sidi Mukhtar al-Kunti, Sidi Ahmad al-Bakka’i, Sidi Umar bin Ahmad, Shaykh Ramadan bin Ahmad, Shaykh Abd al-Karim al-Maghili and many others. The presence of such large number of Sufi scholars enhanced greatly not only the spread of Islam in the area, but *Tasawwuf* as well. According to Zahraddeen,\(^\text{19}\) Shaykh al-Maghili was credited for the introduction of *Qadiriyyah Sufi* order in Hausaland (Northern Nigeria) in the 15th Century C.E. The Wangarawa *Sufi* scholars from old Songhai empire also came to Hausaland in the 16th century C.E, who actively spearheaded the spread of Islam and Sufism in different parts of Hausaland.\(^\text{20}\)

Another prominent Sufi order introduced into the West African region is the *Tijjaniyyah Sufi* order. It was founded in 1781 C.E in Algeria by Shaykh Ahmad bin Muhammad al-Tijani (1735-1815 C.E). Kaura posits that:

\(^{16}\) Al-Dhahabi, M.H. op.cit, P.366


Tijaniyyah order came into West Africa through the activities of the Mauritanian tribe of Idaw Ali. Notably its spread and wide acceptance was due to the initiation of Umar bin Sa’id al-Futi into the order and the subsequent Jihad he launched.21

Shaykh Umar Al-Futi no doubt played a significant role in the spread of the Tijaniyyah Sufi order in Hausaland. On his way to Makkah for pilgrimage he visited Sokoto and Bornu where he initiated many Muslims into the Tijaniyyah order. During his stay in Sokoto it was widely speculated that Shaykh Umar al-Futi initiated Sultan Muhammad Bello into Tijaniyyah. However this remained controversial because it was refuted by some scholars.22

6. **Tasawwuf as a catalyst in the Islamic proselitisation process in West Africa**

Tasawwuf had indeed played a very significant role in the spread of Islam throughout the West African sub-region. The massive Islamic proselitisation process in the region was generally championed by sufi preachers and missionaries through their untiring efforts. Consequently many non-Muslims were converted to Islam by such efforts. Therefore it can be concluded based on this premise that their conversion to Islam in the hands of sufi scholars meant automatic enrolment or initiation into the sufi orders which the scholars belonged.23

In this way, Tasawwuf continued to gain more currency and to favorably flourish side by side with the growth of Islam. The Muslim scholars transmitted Islam to the non-Muslims through peaceful means such as admonitions, persuasions, appeals, good behaviors, honest dealings among other things. In fact they never resorted to use of arms and coercion to force the people to convert to Islam against their volition as widely circulated by the Orientalists.24

The introduction of Islam and also Sufism in West Africa had no doubt played a significant role in boosting Islam and Arabic literary activities in the whole region. Centres of Islamic learning and Sufi Zawiyas were established in some of the major towns and cities such as Timbuktu, Gao, Jenne, Katsina, Kano, Yandoto and many others25. The sufi scholars who established such centres and their descendents remained the flag bearers of the traditional Islamic learning and the custodians of the heritage of Islamic knowledge up to today in these areas.

7. **The Role of Tasawwuf in the Sokoto Jihad movement**

Shaykh Jibril bin Umar has contributed to the development of Tasawwuf in Hausaland. He initiated both Shaykh Uthman bin Fodio and his brother Shaykh Abdullahi bin Fodio into the Qadiriyyah sufi order.26

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21 Kaura, op.cit., P.112  
23 Ahmad, M. op.cit., P.60  
26 Ahmad, M. op.cit., P.61
The Sokoto jihad leaders have accorded a special priority to *Tasawwuf* in general and *Qadiriyyah* order in particular in their scheme of Islamic reforms. Shaykh Uthman bin Fodio has stated in his *Najm al-ikhwan*\(^{27}\) that he belonged to the party of Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani. He also described his followers (*jama’ah*) as that of the mystics who are followers of *Qadiriyyah* sufi order\(^{28}\). In fact the Sokoto jihad has derived a lot of influence and inspiration from *Tasawwuf* which they used as an effective tool in executing their jihad. They used *Tasawwuf* as effective means of instilling in the minds of Muslims in Hausaland a sense of moral and spiritual discipline which served as an impetus to the generality of the Muslims to courageously lend their total support for the jihad. According to Kaura\(^{29}\):

The extent to which this was achieved is explained by the ability of the jihad leaders to carry the masses along with them, and the endurance of the masses in the turbulent wars.

The Sokoto jihad scholars particularly Shaykh Uthman bin Fodio, Shaykh Abdullahi bin Fodio, Sultan Muhammad Bello, Nana Asma’u and many others wrote extensively a number of treatise on *Tasawwuf* as a strategy in effecting moral reforms in the Hausa society. Some of the issues they emphasized in their writings include purification of the soul which entails overcoming spiritual ailments such as envy, hatred, hypocrisy, lying, selfishness, greed, pomposity, cheating, excessive desire for power and materialism and so on. They also advocated for inculcation of praise worthy qualities such as piety, sincerity, asceticism, self contentment, honesty, trustworthiness, benevolence, repentance, constant consciousness of Allah (SWT) and so on.

Sultan Muhammad Bello confirms in his *Infaq al-maysur* that his father Shaykh Uthman bin Fodio has indeed taught *Tasawwuf* to his students. However it need to be noted that the kind of *Tasawwuf* which Shaykh Uthman taught his *sufi* students is not the type that leads to the attainment of *kashf*. In fact he categorically states in his *Tahdhir al-Ikhwan*\(^{30}\):

> I train people on the path of piety which is keeping to the commands of Allah and keeping away from His prohibitions in pursuance of the characters (Sunnah) of the Messenger of Allah (pbuh). But as for the saying that I train people to attain *kashf* as the perfect men from among the saints used to do is totally untrue.

The *Sufi* literature written by the Sokoto jihad leaders were essentially focused on general *Tasawwuf* which is beneficial to every Muslim\(^{31}\). Most of such writings were emphatic on worship (*Ibadat*), interpersonal dealings (*Mu’amalat*), ethics and morality (*akhlaq*). They also tried to blend Islamic

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\(^{27}\) Bin Fodio, Shaykh Uthman, (n.d) *Najm al-Ikhwan*, (n.p) (manuscript) P.11

\(^{28}\) Bin Fodio, Shaykh Uthman, (n.d) *Tabshir al-ummah al-Muhammadiyyah*, (n.p) (manuscript) P.9

\(^{29}\) Kaura, J.M. The moderate and philosophical sufi ideas of the (Sokoto) jihad leaders and their contributions to sufi literature, in conference proceedings, (eds) Abubakar Mustapha and Abubakar Garba (1991) University of Maiduguri, Nigeria, P.97

\(^{30}\) Bin Fodio, Shaykh Uthman (n.d) *Tahdhir al-Ikhwan*, (manuscript) P.31

\(^{31}\) The authors of this presentation are in possession of many manuscripts which were written by some of the Sokoto jihad leaders. These manuscripts need to be edited, translated to various International languages and get published for the benefit of every Muslim in all crannies of the world.
jurisprudence (Fiqh) with Tasawwuf, like Imam al-Ghazali,\textsuperscript{32} stressing that two aspects are necessarily intertwined as they complement each other. The jihad scholars tried to analyze and bring out what Tasawwuf can offer in reforming the social malaise and high moral corruption that has pervaded the rank and file of the Hausa society at that time.

8. **The Role of Shaykh Abdullah bin Fodio towards the development of Tasawwuf**

Shaykh Abdullah bn Fodio was born in 1180 A.H/1766 C.E\textsuperscript{33} at Maganimi. He was a Junior brother to the leader of the Sokoto jihad movement – Shaykh Uthman bn Fodio. His father Muhammad was a prominent Islamic scholar which earned him the title: ‘Fodiye’ meaning ‘the learned man’ in Fulfulde language\textsuperscript{34}. In his educational pursuits, Shaykh Abdullah had studied various disciplines under different reputable Muslim scholars. He later became a distinguished scholar of international repute. He wrote hundreds of books on different aspects of Islam including Tasawwuf. Some of his works on Tasawwuf are still available in manuscript form\textsuperscript{35}.

The Sufi writings of Shaykh Abdullah bn Fodio have contributed immensely towards the development of Tasawwuf in the nooks and crannies of Hausaland and even beyond. Some of these writings re still studied among many Muslim students especially in the traditional Islamic learning in most parts of West Africa.

Some of the Sufi literatures written by Shaykh Abdullah bn Fodio include:

1. *Matiyat al-zaad ila al-ma’ad*
2. *Diya’ al-Siyasat*
3. *Kitab Adab al-adat*
4. *Minan al-mannan*
5. *Sabil ahl al-Salah ila al-falah*
6. *Tariq al-jannah*
7. *Kitab al-nas’ih fi ahamm al-masalah*
8. *Kitab al-mawa’iz*
9. *Kitab adab al-mu’asharah*
10. *Kitab idah zad al-ma’ad ila muroqbat al-awqat bi al-awrad*
11. *Durar al-hikam*
12. *Akhlaq al-mustafa (SAW)*
13. *Kitab Taqrib al-daruri*
14. *Tahdhib al-insan min khisal al-shaytan* and many others.

\textsuperscript{32} Refer for details to Imam al-Ghazali’s *Ihya ulum al-Din* (vol.1-4) Translated into English by Maulana Fazlul Karim, published by Hassan Yassar ventures, Kano, Nigeria.

\textsuperscript{33} Kani, A.M, op.cit., PP. 1-2. See also Zahraddeen, M.S , op.cit., P.159


\textsuperscript{35} Quite a number of Sufi manuscript works written by Shaykh Abdullah bn Fodio are currently personal library collections of the presenters of this paper.
9. Recommendations

At this juncture we wish to proffer the following recommendations:

- International conferences on issues relating to *Tasawwuf* need to be organized on regular basis in different parts of the Muslim world. This may facilitate greater participation and better understanding of such issues among the Muslims.
- Muslims should try to rely on books, sources and materials on *Tasawwuf* written by Muslim authors. Some of the oriental sources are not so reliable and sometimes they are even misleading.
- Manuscript sources that delve on *Tasawwuf* need to be well preserved in our modern repositories. Efforts should be put in place to edit and translate such manuscripts in international languages, for the benefit of those who are not quite conversant with Arabic.
- The Muslim world should be more united and more tolerant among themselves and even to the non-Muslims. Advocacy peaceful co-existence and promotion of continued societal harmony should remain their watch-word.
- The Muslims should assist their fellow Muslims who are displaced in different parts of the world.
- We should continue to pray for Allah’s guidance and protection of our *Iman*, so that we live in this world as true Muslims and die as true Muslims.

10. Conclusion

In contemporary times we are witnessing the emergence of so many *Sufi* orders in different parts of the Muslim world. Some of these orders have unfortunately introduced innovations some of which are incompatible with the teachings of the Qur’an and Sunnah. It is this kind of un-healthy development which is prompting many Muslims to have negative attitude to the whole idea of *Tasawwuf*. However to be candid it is unfair to dismiss *Tasawwuf* totally as something useless and irrelevant in the present time based on misdeeds of some of its proponents. In fact the modern Muslims stand to benefit a lot spiritually from the ideals of *Tasawwuf*.

We hope that this presentation will generate useful discussions and wider deliberations from distinguished participants that will widen the horizons of the issues raised for better comprehension and appreciation. We congratulate the organizers of this event of International magnitude and for giving us the opportunity to make a presentation. May Almighty Allah guide us, protect us and unite us all under the banner of Islam.

*Wassalamu Alaykum wa Rahmatul-lah Ta’ala wa barkatuh*
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